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THE CIVIL, SILENT, AND SAVAGE IN ISHIGURO'S *THE BURIED GIANT*

by

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that the political situation between Britons and Saxons within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* further articulates Ishiguro's ongoing critique of Western humanism's logic of labelling the Other. I also argue for a definition of the figure of the buried giant broadly speaking as the Other *par excellence*, as an entity of pure alterity, and as a Lèvinasian "infinite other." As *The Buried Giant* demonstrates, Ishiguro continues to write against the politics of humanism that have flourished in Western art, science, and political philosophy since the Enlightenment. Though Ishiguro sets *The Buried Giant* loosely in the medieval period, the Saxon warrior and proto-terrorist Wistan exposes readers to many of contemporary humanism's hypocritical contradictions. These contradictions include the violence done by labels such as "civil" and "savage," and the arrogance of superimposing "civilized" and refined "culture" onto nature. In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro portrays how many of the origins for humanism—particularly its privileging of rationality—can be traced back into the medieval period by examining the unsettling process of how the imperialist Britons define "human being." What Ishiguro ultimately exposes however in both Britons and Saxons is their shared terror of the irrationality of death. I end my paper arguing that Ishiguro's *oeuvre* can best be read and understood within an emerging cultural post-humanist tradition.

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CHAPTER 1: THE CIVIL, SILENT, AND SAVAGE IN ISHIGURO'S *THE BURIED GIANT*

In his *Guardian* review of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Salman Rushdie characterizes the novel as “a story both beautiful and cruel” (“Rereading”). Rushdie goes on to emphasize the protagonist Stevens' own “ruinous self-deceptions” and suggests that “[t]he real story here is that of a man destroyed by the ideas upon which he has built his life” (“Rereading”). Rushdie proposes that this aging English butler, the novel's narrator and focal point, has been “destroyed by a personal code of ethics” and must face that “[his] whole life has been a foolish mistake” (“Rereading”). For Rushdie, Stevens' “only defense against the horror of this knowledge is the same capacity for self-deception which proved his undoing” (“Rereading”). Pithy statements such as these speak not only to the decline of men such as Stevens in post-war England, but offer themselves to a much larger picture of Ishiguro's *oeuvre* beyond his Booker Prize-winning novel from 1989.

Readers of Japanese-born British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro often describe his style to be as subtle as his stories are heartbreaking.¹ Discussions of his narratives tend to focus on questions of loss, memory, repression, and a hushed fatalism or resignation to the past that frequently awaits his characters.² While Ishiguro constructs a “beautiful” interplay between the head and the heart, he entices readers to commit themselves to some of the “cruelty” to which Rushdie points as his narratives implicate readers via empathy.

Ishiguro's gift for emotionally intense and intellectually rich stories is a hallmark of his work.

A Pale View of Hills (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) all contain an enormous amount of *pathos*. Yet Ishiguro subtly ensnares readers and characters into extraordinarily difficult ethical conundrums. Ishiguro repeatedly places his characters in situations that lead to an unexpected and upsetting resurgence of the past, vicariously pushing readers to first face and then question many of humanism's shortcomings in myriad ways. These many shortcomings include the swift introduction of American mores into Japan following the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in *A Pale View of Hills*, the influence of western Marxist humanism on Japanese propaganda during the second World War in *An Artist of the Floating World*, and a seemingly innocuous defense of a Nazi sympathizer through empathy as we see in *The Remains of the Day*. Recently, however, Ishiguro's critique of humanism has more directly pointed to the systemic oppression of the "non-human" Other as we see in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Buried Giant*.

Ishiguro's two most recent novels present similar critiques of humanism from differing vantage points. While the former takes the perspective of the non-human Other as clone, the latter is written from within the language of imperialism and against the mislabeled savage Other—in this novel's case—the Saxons. By "the language of imperialism" I am partially building upon Johan Galtung's "Structural Theory of Imperialism" by maintaining the critical assumption that "imperialism is a system which splits up collectivities and relates some of the parts to each other in relations of *harmony of interests*, and other parts in relations of *disharmony of interests*, or *conflicts of interest*"

(81, italics in original). For Ishiguro, the Britons are the imperialist power of *The Buried Giant*. While Galtung is more concerned with understanding the negotiations of power and interests as a Marxist materialism, I believe these relative value systems to be equally applicable to the basic imperialist drive that “splits up collectivities” (Galtung 81) into racial identities between the dominant force and the marginalized Other. In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro specifically negotiates between those the dominant force labeled “civilized” and the marginalized Other labeled “savage.”

Ishiguro’s novels also often situate readers and characters in a social fracture that puts multiple groups of people at odds or in direct conflict with one another. *The Buried Giant* suspends readers and characters somewhere between either defending the violence of the past or embracing a vengeful call to arms in the present. While Sir Gawain insists that because of King Arthur “all [grew] old in a time of peace” (214), Wistan rejects any assumption that the past’s “wrongs [should] go forgotten and unpunished” (286). In *The Buried Giant*, readers and characters oscillate between either disavowing the injustices of Arthurian imperialism in the name of peace, or succumbing to terrorizing and destroying that same society in the name of justice. Ishiguro halves *The Buried Giant* by pushing readers and characters alike to choose sides within this social splintering. Ishiguro’s stories question whether we can look directly at the unspeakably violent crimes of the past, and if we can truly address such crimes at all. With each of his novels Ishiguro returns us to the central question informing them: do the crimes of the past necessitate a cultural and collective forgetting when forgiveness becomes impossible?

Many critics describe Ishiguro’s most recent publication as a significant departure from his earlier texts as it forays into genre fiction (much more so than *Never Let Me*

Go). Alexandra Altra's *New York Times* article claims that the novel is "the weirdest, riskiest and most ambitious thing he's published" but that it lacks the emotional understatement of previous works ("For Kazuo Ishiguro"). Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* book review states that while *The Buried Giant*'s "dreamlike narrative" is not entirely unlike 1995's *The Unconsoled*, "the result is an ungainly fable that reflects none of Mr. Ishiguro's myriad and subtle gifts" ("Review: In 'The Buried Giant'"). Neil Gaiman's interview with Ishiguro, on the other hand, attributes the negative reactions of critics and readers to the novel to the "stigma against fantasy" ("Let's talk about genre"). *The Buried Giant* is set after all in an early medieval England rife with fantastic elements including ogres and sprites as well as intertextual references to familiar characters like Sir Gawain and the Knights of the Round Table. Although Ishiguro utilizes the epic-fantasy genre for the first time, *The Buried Giant* returns to many ongoing concerns within Ishiguro's oeuvre. *The Buried Giant* asks readers once more to face a troubling past that reemerges after remaining suppressed by its characters for years. With such undesirable emergences of the past come the more distressing questions of who buried or erased such history in the first place, and for what reason.

In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro confronts the disquieting ethics of a series of "necessary evils."³ According to Gawain, "Yes, we slaughtered plenty, I admit it, caring not who was strong and who weak. God may not have smiled at us, but we cleansed the land of war" (*Buried* 285). By exposing and confronting what the Arthurians determine to be the necessary evils of the past, *The Buried Giant* shares a similar theme with *Never Let Me Go*. Ishiguro's 2005 science fiction romance *Never Let Me Go*, for example, centers on narrator Kathy H.'s post-humanist ruminations on the ethics of harvesting organs from

clones such as herself.⁴ Such concerns destabilize traditional humanist assumptions about both human rights and those with access to such rights by blurring the division between human and clone, self and Other.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the clone children of the boarding school Hailsham must decide how best to respond to their realization that the “necessary evil” of their society is that they have been condemned to a life of suffering for the benefit of others. The principal characters in *Never Let Me Go* must respond to whether or not they will defend or reprehend a system which lengthens the human lifespan at the cost of condemning harvest-clones to suffering and an early death. The characters and readers face an ethical conundrum that is never directly addressed. A similar situation frames *A Pale View of Hills*, where the ghosts of the narrator Etsuko’s past—particularly her Nagasaki home which has been forever blown off of the map in the name of justice—return to haunt the present through her distorted memories. *Never Let Me Go* more directly questions the logic of humanism when taken to illogical conclusions. Can one privilege the health and prosperity of a select few when it comes at the cost of prejudicially eliminating or oppressing the non-human Other who have been denied their own humanity?

The Buried Giant centers on a deeply distressing mistreatment of the Other in the name of prosperity for the oppressor. The novel’s “civilized” Britons attain peace through savagely slaughtering an entire generation of innocent Saxon youths. They then erase their atrocity from the historical and collective consciousness in a foolish hope for political stability through a memory-repressing mist. As Gawain insists to Wistan, “Without this she-dragon’s breath, would peace ever have come? Look how we live now, sir! Old foes as cousins, village by village [...] Think, sir, once that breath should cease,

what might be awoken across this land even after these years!” (285). *The Buried Giant* questions the various modes of procuring peace by exploring differing responses to the ethics of reconciliation in the Arthurian Knights and the Saxon warrior Wistan who sees himself as a reckoner. Arthurian imperialism tries to demarcate what is and is not human and what can and cannot be remembered. The Arthurian Britons subjugate the Saxons as barbaric Others in an attempt to maintain peace against what they label savage and irrational while simultaneously erasing their own acts of barbarism.

With these contexts in mind I would like to offer two grounding propositions: first, that the political situation between Britons and Saxons within *The Buried Giant* further articulates Ishiguro’s ongoing critique of Western humanism’s logic of labelling the Other both within and beyond the confines of the novel. Second, I argue for a definition of the figure of the buried giant broadly speaking as the Other *par excellence*. By this I do not mean narratological or social understandings of the liminal Other as a misunderstood, marginalized, or disregarded human subaltern. Instead, I mean the Other in the widest sense as that which subliminally eludes both rationality and humanism’s efforts to contain or come to terms with it. By “Other *par excellence*” I am referring to the same absolute Other Lévinas defines in *Totality and Infinity*, in which “the infinite is the absolutely other” (“Transcendence”). I find the primary “buried giants” to be a series of seemingly irrational elements existing within nature: namely death and the terror provoked by the concepts of silence, nothingness, and infinity.

While the parameters of this paper demand a focused reading of *The Buried Giant*, I believe Ishiguro to be best classified as a post-humanist novelist. I do not consider Ishiguro to be *anti-humanist* but rather questioning the validity of many of

humanism's core tenets by exposing its myriad historical failings in his work. By *post-humanist* I do not mean dealing strictly with the bioengineering disputes over cyborgs, robots, and electric sheep in the literary (and scientific) late twentieth century. Instead I mean to say that Ishiguro writes against the politics of humanism that have flourished in Western art, science, and political philosophy since the Enlightenment. As *The Buried Giant* demonstrates, however, many of the origins for humanism precede this eighteenth-century watershed moment and can be traced back into the medieval period by examining the unsettling process of how the imperialist Britons define "human being." While some scholars have acknowledged *Never Let Me Go* as an exemplar of post-humanist literature, I have yet to find a scholar willing to attribute the same to *The Buried Giant*, let alone to much of Ishiguro's larger *oeuvre*.⁵ Though Ishiguro sets *The Buried Giant* loosely in the medieval period, the Saxon warrior and proto-terrorist Wistan nonetheless exposes readers to many of contemporary humanism's hypocritical contradictions. These contradictions include the violence done by labels such as *civil* and *savage*, and the arrogance of superimposing "civilized" and refined "culture" onto nature.

As Wistan comes to realize, the Britons' inability to logically subsume, subvert, or make sense of the buried giant (in effect to colonize or dominate it) becomes their Achilles heel. Wistan both recognizes this weakness and redirects the terror of the buried giant—of the unreasonable and insensible—toward his oppressors, effectively terrorizing them with the irrationalism of death and the fear of nothingness. Upon finding a weak link within the logic of his captors, Wistan swiftly and violently ushers in the end of Arthur's political epoch by reigniting the war between the Britons and Saxons through his recognition of the buried giant's power to take even a "swaggering lord" and to turn

him “swiftly to an infant ready to make water before [him] for fear” and “dread of any Saxon” (220-21). Wistan’s terrorist tactics are effective even on Lord Brennus, whose fear “now sits in his belly a giant worm” (221). This situation exposes many distressing problems within the logic of early conquest and imperialism. It further emphasizes, however, the precariousness of the West of today which remains built upon the same humanizing logic, riddled with the same hypocrisies from our bloodied pasts and, as we have seen in recent years, vulnerable to the same acts of terrorism.

I plan to divide my reading of *The Buried Giant* into four sections to fully develop my two claims. Each section will relate in differing ways to contradictions inherent within Enlightenment humanism and its fundamental dependence on the concept of the dehumanized Other. My initial section will focus on the power of language as a colonizing tool—the Arthurian master’s tongue as it were—to both conceptually rearrange nature and to demarcate the civilized human from the savage Other. My second section focuses on the moments in the text in which Ishiguro destabilizes the division between the civil and savage, particularly when either group is confronted with their mutual fear of the unknown or irrational. My third section gestures toward a definition of the buried giant, thinking especially about its notable absence in the narrative, and what it suggests about rationalism’s failings, particularly as a veiled critique of humanism. My final section will briefly pause to reconsider Ishiguro’s career in light of *The Buried Giant*, focusing as I have mentioned on repositioning Ishiguro within the post-humanist tradition.

Despite my placing Ishiguro within this conversation, I will return nonetheless to the question of collective forgetting to suggest that Ishiguro self-consciously stages the

novel as an antinomy: an irresolvable contradiction that exists simultaneously within the novel. *The Buried Giant* divides readers between defending Arthur's repression of the memory of historical crimes against humanity or embracing Wistan's call to arms. One therefore either defends the necessity of historical and racial oppression as necessary for peace, or embraces the complete destruction of the oppressor in the name of justice. In an interview with Elysha Chang in *Electric Literature*, Ishiguro speaks of this division by claiming, "Every society, every person even, has some buried memories of violence or destruction. *The Buried Giant* asks whether awakening these buried things might lead to another terrible cycle of violence. And whether it's better to do this at the risk of cataclysm, or whether it's better to keep these memories buried and forgotten" ("Language"). As readers of Ishiguro are no doubt aware, these questions perhaps have no absolute answers and ultimately emphasize one of the fundamental contradictions in humanism that Ishiguro's novels address: despite the unethical nature of Othering, is it possible to think outside of this mechanism? And can the void between self and Other be ethically bridged?

1 — LANGUAGE OF IMPERIALISM

No, he wasn't a bad man. He was just someone who worked very hard doing what he thought was for the best. But you see, Ichiro, when the war ended, things were very different. He thought of all the people who had been killed, all the little boys your age, Ichrio, who no longer had parents, he thought of all these things and he thought perhaps his songs were a mistake. —*An Artist of the Floating World*

Early in *The Buried Giant* Axl and his wife Beatrice enter a small Saxon village. When "viewed from a distance and a certain height," the settlement appears to the travelers to be "familiar" (47). Yet once within its walls, the simple village

metamorphoses into “a chaotic labyrinth” (49). Axl becomes uneasy at the sight before him, noting that:

the Saxons seemed to find it acceptable to leave random objects, even pieces of rubble, lying in the middle of the path. But what troubled Axl most was [...] the smell of excrement, human or animal [...] All over the village people had left out, on the fronts of houses or on the side of the street, piles of putrefying meat as offerings to their various gods. (50)

Ishiguro’s unnamed narrator of *The Buried Giant* makes numerous unqualified assumptions about the Saxons, including his suggestion that the putrefied meat serves as a religious offering. Though the Saxons are indeed “pagans,” their Briton counterparts rarely accurately identify their “savage” rituals, and there are few if any moments when Ishiguro’s narrator pays these cultural and religious differences due deference. The predominating perspective of *The Buried Giant* is one that labels the Saxon villagers as pagan savages as they are seen specifically through the partial perceptions of the Britons. Yet perhaps Ishiguro’s supreme achievement with *The Buried Giant* remains his effortless reversal of the civil with the savage, calling into question to what extent savagery always “lurks in the depths of a man’s heart” (312), no matter how civil his king and code may be.

As Axl and Beatrice walk through the village, they misrecognize the shapes of dogs, cows, and donkeys as the animals surreally blur together with a group of Saxon children running in front of them. When Axl and Beatrice enter the unruly village, they are surprised to see how quickly their leader Ivor subdues the chaotic settlement, even while outnumbered as “a Briton living here among Saxons” (59). Though Ivor is an

elderly man, the Saxons “yield to his authority” in the same manner as the villagers’ dogs: both silence themselves when their leader speaks (57). In moments such as these, Ishiguro ironically and pointedly merges the uncivilized with the animal, privileging the Britons’ capacity to subdue, govern, and humanize their “wild” and “unruly” subjects. Even Ivor—whose deceased wife shared blood and history with the Saxons—distrusts those under his charge. As Ivor explains to Beatrice in a hushed undertone, “You’re right, Mistress Beatrice, I wonder at myself to live among such savages. Better dwell in a pit of rats” (74). Regardless of his opinion of his pagan subjects, Ivor holds a ruling position over the villagers, implying that the Britons currently control the Saxons and most likely have done so since the end of their most recent war.

By following Axl and Beatrice on their journey, the narrator self-consciously tells his story from a Briton perspective that often subjugates Saxons by Othering them as fundamentally barbaric. At times, Britons think of Saxons as not merely something lesser than themselves, but even as non-human. The Britons repeatedly mistake Saxon language for the foul grunts of ogres and other beasts of nature. When beasts take Wistan’s young orphan charge captive, he claims to overhear “the grumbling sounds the ogres made when talking to each other” (90). While on their voyage to find their son, Axl and Beatrice, along with Sir Gawain, encounter numerous foreigners whose voices and aggressions are rendered into barbar, such as when “a growl escaped from the crowd” of riotous villagers in Ivor’s Saxon village (66). When held at spear-point, Axl hears “murmured voices” (56). Though *murmur* is far from a direct metonymy for *barbar*, the similitude of their effect and meaning is worth pausing over, and surely without accident. By emphasizing the murmurs (like the barbar) of foreigners, Ishiguro stresses inarticulate sounds that are

detached from the semantics of language. While historically the savage speaks in barbar, the cultivated human speaks in a refined language.

Ishiguro incorporates numerous murmurs and barbar when the Britons combat hostile enemies: Axl and the others joining him on his journey to his son confront unidentifiable foes who are often “groaning” or “squeal[ing] like trapped mice” (141), or who let loose such inarticulate noises as the “cry of a beast” resembling “the howl of a wolf” or “the deeper roar of a bear” (169). Unable to communicate in his own language and lacking the protection of Arthurian law, Axl “searched his memory for some Saxon phrases. When nothing came to him, he made do with a few soothing noises, such as he might have made to an unruly horse” (57). Describing “the work of wild *animal bandits*,” Ivor emphasizes the ogres’ foreign homeland: “these fiends which curse us tonight. Where did they come from? They’re no mere ogres. No one here has seen their like before. Why did they journey here, *to make camp* on our riverbank?” (63, emphases added). Given how frequently the Britons describe the Saxons in animalistic terms, here too one ought to consider whether these are ogres or men mislabeled as savage beasts: for what kind of ogres talk to one another, or travel across large stretches of water to make camp?

What appears upon even a cursory reading of *The Buried Giant* is that when the Britons confront something outside the purview of Arthurian law and culture they mislabel it as other than human and identify it as animal, or as a fantastic creature with magical powers. For those under Arthur’s successor Lord Brennus, including Ivor and the Knights of the Round Table, their role is to civilize the Saxon savages: to humanize them, enforce Arthurian laws and customs, and to erase particular differences between them in

order to procure a lasting peace now that their war has ceased. The Britons sustain their domination and the precarious conditions for reconciliation through the unwavering defenders of Arthurian imperialism, including the Knights of the Round Table like Gawain, Arthur's mentor Merlin, Father Jonus, the great "Law of the Innocents" (214), and the she-dragon Querig. As an addendum to these forces, the Britons' ability to maintain sovereignty comes in part out of their using language as a colonizing tool. The Britons manifest this power by determining the laws of order, the conditions for peace, and how best to civilize the Saxons by distinguishing human customs from animal barbarism in the aftermath of the ongoing slaughter between the two peoples.

And yet the Britons' power of language at times fails them, such as when Axl and Beatrice confront inexplicable phenomena throughout their journey, including Querig's memory-repressing fog, the Great Plain, and the giant's cairn. Much of Axl and Beatrice's inability to understand these enigmatic natural phenomena comes from their failure to name them. Without having crafted their definitions, Axl and Beatrice cannot quell their fears, many of which will grow "all the more monstrous for being unnamed" (221). Once the Britons name the mysteries they confront, their fear of the unnamed and unknown becomes not only more ordered but, in an Adamic manner, subject to the one doing the naming: to be subject to the master's tongue. While speaking with Ivor, Axl explains to his host that "we suffer enough from the mist—for that's how my wife and I have come to call it" (59). Though Ivor recognizes that some association exists between Querig and his inability to properly recall the past, he and the Saxons of his village do not have a word such as Axl's and therefore cannot begin to conceptualize the natural entity

which surrounds and disturbs them: “Ah, the mist. A good name for it. Who knows how much truth there is in what we hear, Mistress Beatrice?” (64).

When Axl and Beatrice fail to recognize or give names to the enigmatic phenomena on their journey, they often can only liken these anomalies to “the power and mystery of the Great Plain” and, reinforcing their ignorance of the unknown, must recognize “that they were now trespassing on but a small corner of it” (32). As a large swath of flat land where very little grows, the Great Plain acts as a physical demonstration of the limits of the Britons’ acumen. Unsurprisingly, Ishiguro buries his giant in the Great Plain. Though Axl and Beatrice pass over the giant quickly in the narrative, they must continually *speak* to one another as they proceed on top of the unnamed burial ground “as though wishing to deceive any listening demons about their intentions” (32). I wish to reemphasize here the power at the Britons’ disposal to maintain a superficial imperial control through language over their mysterious and forbidding land by defining and rearranging it in an intelligible manner to suit their ruling needs. Leaders such as Ivor and Gawain extend this linguistic power as a means of governing their Saxon subjects by defining them against their Briton rulers, by enforcing and upholding Arthurian law, by determining civil customs and culture, diminishing pagan “superstitions,” and other political gestures contingent on the Othering mechanics of humanism.

Name calling causes considerable violence to many of those subjugated to it throughout Ishiguro’s narrative. After being taunted by a cluster of eerily swine-like Saxon children, Beatrice warns Axl “There’s something strange here tonight” and that “the children [are] following us [...] asking a hundred questions and wondering if *to call*

us names or be our friends,” as though the two were mutually exclusive (50, emphases added). Gawain reminds Axl that while the latter once “curs[ed] Arthur to his face,” the king only “replied gently” (273). When Wistan returns to Ivor’s village after rescuing Edwin, the villagers realize that the boy was injured during the fighting. Once the Saxon villagers hear of Edwin’s injury, they communally determine him to have been “bitten by a fiend” and decide they must slaughter him, fearing he will “before long turn fiend himself and wreck horror” (75).

The Britons do more with their language than name and reorder the landscape, the savage ogres and Saxons, and the phenomenal mist. The Arthurians find in their language two principal mechanisms to maintain and enforce their sovereignty, the backbone of their imperialism: Merlin casts a spell over the she-dragon Querig, and the Britons formulate the great Law of the Innocents which the Knights enforce, following Sir Gawain’s noble lead. It is worth noting that Gawain defends both Merlin’s spell and the “great law” as fundamentally Christian acts of mercy and nonviolence, couching his apologies for both as echoes of the holy *Word* and given by the grace of God. A defender of Arthur’s cause to the death, Gawain is equally steadfast in defense of Merlin:

A dark man he may have been, but in this [spell] he did God’s will, not only Arthur’s. Without this she-dragon’s breath, would peace ever have come? Look how we live now, sir! Old foes as cousins, village by village [...] Think, sir, once that breath should cease, what might be awoken across this land even after these years! (285)

Merlin secures peace between the Britons and Saxons by ensuring that his spell on Querig causes her breath to seep across Anglia and cause considerable memory loss for

all those who inhale the miasmic air. While Merlin's spell produces a temporary concord between the warring peoples, the strongest cause of peace comes out of how the Britons define and write the Law of the Innocents, Arthur's great humanizing achievement.

What Gawain refers to as the "great law" (213) alludes to the Cáin Adomnáin of 697 AD. The ancient law, an early prohibition against crimes against humanity, stipulated that Irish and Scottish warriors must refrain from harming those without weaponry, particularly women, children, and clergy, during times of war ("Law of the Innocents"). Though the act of writing the Law of the Innocents precedes the diegetic present and what is revealed of the past in *The Buried Giant*, Sir Gawain—ever loyal to defending Arthur's honor in death—reiterates its role in ending the war with the Saxons, asking numerous people "would peace ever have come" without it (285). Even Wistan is cognizant of Arthur's radical attempt to recognize a common humanity in the innocent bystanders of both warring factions, despite his fixed hatred of the Britons: "Arthur charged us at all times to spare the innocents caught in the clatter of war. More, sir, he commanded us to rescue and give sanctuary when we could to all women, children, and elderly, be they Briton or Saxon. On such actions were the bonds of trust built, even as battles raged" (112). In a double gesture, not only did the Law of the Innocents depend on Arthur's *written word*, but its cogency and enforcement was equally contingent upon the Knights' *word of honor*—their pledge of allegiance—to their king. Gawain affirms the same sanctity of the law as Wistan (perhaps the single piece of common ground the two share), insisting "Is [Arthur] not proved right each year that passes? Did you not all grow old in a time of peace? [...] The Law of the Innocents, a mighty law indeed, one to bring

men closer to God—so Arthur himself always said, or was it Master Axl called it that?”
(214).

After conflating the religious and holy with the king and his knights, Arthur’s kingdom comes crashing down when the Britons violate their own great law in a hypocritical act of savage slaughter. By breaking their own sanctified word of honor and their written word of law, the Britons both invalidate the strength within their imperialist language and destabilize law and order. In the aftermath, Axl confronts absolute disillusionment, forsakes Arthur, and abandons his post as Knight of Peace. Having destroyed the only tenuous tie between the two warring peoples, Arthur’s unforgivable hypocrisy and his Knights’ heinous slaughtering of countless Saxon children sow the seeds which will allow Wistan to eventually destroy the stability of the kingdom. Believing the Britons’ word to be null, Wistan takes it upon himself to unbury and bring to light the injustices of the past and to savagely cut down all of the king’s men.

2 — CIVILIZED SAVAGES

We know it, so we might as well just say it. If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in the rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that’s where you’ll find where we all came from.

—*Never Let Me Go*

In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro unflinchingly confronts cyclical violence and the all-too-human drive for vengeance by destabilizing the separation between the civilized from the savage. When Axl renounces his Knighthood and his allegiance to King Arthur, he unintentionally aligns himself with Wistan. Speaking directly of Axl’s momentous political break, Wistan acknowledges the intrinsic worth of the Law of the Innocents before the Britons obliterated its meaning:

[T]hat was a great treaty you brokered, and well held for years. Didn't all men, Christian and pagan, sleep more easily for it, even on the eve of battle? To fight knowing our innocents safe in our villages? And yet, sir, the wars didn't finish. Where once we fought for land and God, we now fought to avenge fallen comrades, themselves slaughtered in vengeance. Where could it end? Babes growing to men knowing only days of war. And your great law already suffering violation. (274)

When the Knights violate Arthur's great law by slaughtering innumerable children, they prefigure how the Saxons' later reignite a call to arms and for bloodshed to such an extent that the violence between the two groups can perhaps only end in genocide. Ishiguro scarcely alludes to either the figure of the buried giant or genocide throughout the course of the novel. Yet genocide nonetheless bookends the unnamed narrator's tale: first perpetuated by the Britons before the story opens and implied with the Saxons after the conclusion of Axl and Beatrice's story. *The Buried Giant* leaves Wistan and Edwin with genocide as their precise goal, after they destroy the last defenders of Arthur's kingdom (301). At the end of the novel, only the two Saxon warriors remain as the novel's protagonists, sharing between them their "duty to hate all Britons" because of the grave injustices done to their people (301). With Querig slain, Merlin's mist begins to clear and the Britons and Saxons recall the memories of their historical atrocities once more.

By emphasizing the Britons' hypocritical turn against their great humanizing law and their unspeakably violent "slaughter[ing] of babes" (214), Ishiguro conflates the civilized with the savage to the point that the terms become terrifyingly meaningless. The Britons rationalize their slaying as severing an eternal "circle of hate" (214), granting the

warring peoples peace. Ironically, Gawain rearticulates nearly word for word Wistan's acknowledgment of the Law of the Innocents, insisting that Axl consider "how many innocents, Britons or Saxons, were spared over the years" while the law held (213). And yet Gawain contradicts his own humanizing ethic, the human right to dignity in wartime, by justifying their massacre as the only "way for peace to prevail" (213) even if "God may not have smiled" on their inhumane crime (285).

Merlin's spell over Querig symbolizes the Knights' disavowal of their own barbarity, their repudiation of their own war crimes. The civilized end up recursively bleeding into the savage at the moment that peace becomes procured by merciless slaughter. These two recursions appear mutually exclusive and contradictory. Like the Britons' violation of the "fine law to bring men closer to God," their actions against the Saxon innocents uncover a horrifyingly brutal aptitude for racial violence, hatred, and xenophobia (270). Ishiguro exposes the gap between the humanizing words and ruthless actions of the Christianized Britons by highlighting the ironic emptiness in their claims to pay respect to the human decency of all of God's children. The Arthurians do this by preaching the necessity of Querig, Merlin, and the great law. Ishiguro reveals that what the Britons claim to be bastions of nonviolence and peace actually conceal a horrifying truth saturated in violence and war.

By slaughtering a generation of Saxon children, Arthur nullifies his great humanizing accomplishment—his recognition of something truly *human* within the innocent among his abhorred enemy—as quickly as he establishes it. By bringing these contradictions to the fore, Ishiguro stresses the fundamental indeterminacy of some of Arthur's core humanist concerns, including the extent to which human life and decency

ought to be protected, as well as determining what role justice should play in protecting these human rights under secular and sacred law. Ishiguro brilliantly sustains these indeterminacies by embedding them in such circular logic as the “circle of slaughter” (213) and in blending the civilized and savage in dizzying ways. Ishiguro centralizes figurative cycles such as violence begetting future violence and the weighty presence of the dead upon the living throughout *The Buried Giant*. Gawain declares the necessity of the Britons’ crime in order to halt the cycle of violence, arguing with Axl that “Those small Saxon boys you lament would soon have become warriors burning to avenge their fathers. The small girls soon bearing more in their wombs, and this circle of slaughter would never be broken. Look how deep runs the lust for vengeance! [...] Yet with today’s great victory a rare chance comes. We may once and for all *sever this evil circle*” (213, emphases added). In *The Buried Giant*, the truly vicious “circle of hate” (214) becomes the Britons and Saxons’ shared capacity to terrorize one another endlessly through considerable acts of violence. Ishiguro illustrates that their mutual barbarity unites them.

While I have given much attention to the Britons’ atrocities against the Saxons, I have not yet considered Wistan’s terrorist tactics against Arthurian imperialism. At a midpoint in Edwin’s training with Wistan, the great Saxon warrior tells his orphan charge of the origin of his hatred of the Britons and how he determined to destroy the society which has ruled over his people since his youth (220). Growing up an orphan outsider under Lord Brennus, Wistan elaborately describes how his Briton brothers-in-arm continually ostracized him as a young Saxon and never allowed him to coalesce fully with them. “The great lesson,” as Wistan pronounces it, came with his realization that his

fellow Briton warriors would never recognize him as a brother or refined Arthurian Knight. If Gawain's "great law" rests in a theoretically shared common humanity, then Wistan's "great lesson" is his disillusionment with this law in reality. Despite his love for his fellow Briton soldiers and despite their shared identity as defenders of Arthur's honorable name, Wistan's great lesson comes at the cost of battling the xenophobia directed at him because of his Saxon heritage. Through a misinformed sense of culture and civility, the Britons engender in Wistan a savage rage out of a human love.

Wistan recalls for Edwin his "great lesson" with startling lucidity, and it serves as his *raison d'être* in waging his personal war against the same Britons he once viewed "as my brothers" (220). Propelled by his hatred, Wistan learns how to terrorize those defending the same Arthurian cause that he had himself previously guarded. Wistan's capacity to terrorize comes out of his detection of the Britons and Saxons' shared fear of savage slaughter as retribution for their past wrongs. When Edwin asks if and how his teacher took his revenge on his quasi-father figure Lord Brennus, Wistan leaves it up to the youth to decide for himself. (Wistan taking revenge on his "Lord-father" also has an obvious *double entendre*.) Wistan instead describes to the young Saxon how he waited in the "black shadows" to confront and ambush his Lord:

[He] looked at me with terror. For he saw at once this could be no chance encounter, and further, that his usual powers were suspended. It was curious, Master Edwin, to see this swaggering lord turned so swiftly to an infant ready to make water before me for fear [...] I said nothing, but remained before him in silence [...] Then in time I left him, and so you see, Master Edwin, nothing and yet everything had passed between us

[....] Has he fed the fear of that night again and again that it now sits in his belly a giant worm? [...Does his] dread grow all the more monstrous for being unnamed? (221)

It is not by accident that Ishiguro terms Brennus' fear a *giant* worm in his belly, his body's figurative center or core. Even setting the giant aside, a significant number of Ishiguro's most pressing questions in *The Buried Giant* converge during Wistan's silent moment with Brennus. While Lord Brennus had maintained his sovereignty as the post-Arthurian leader up until this moment, Wistan learns that once outside the purview of Briton enforcement, Brennus' power dissolves. His power is only as real as his capacity to enforce it. Through Brennus' fear of Wistan, Ishiguro suggests that even the strength of "swaggering lord[s]" is subject to a greater power and can be undermined by those like Wistan who fail to recognize the sovereignty of their rule, law, and authority, instead seeing these as meaningless words. Wistan's unspoken "great lesson" comes from his realizing that the Britons' sovereignty over the Saxons is socially rather than naturally or religiously constructed.

Wistan's more important lesson is that even the mighty and refined Britons are subject to a larger sovereign power: the fundamental human fear of death and the unknown that no authority can eliminate, colonize, or dominate. Wistan terrorizes Brennus, who is "like an infant ready to make water before [him] in fear" (221), without speaking a word or swinging a sword. What passes between them—the contradictory "nothing and yet everything" (221)—is another ironic reversal in which Ishiguro demonstrates that Lord Brennus' power and authority dissipate and transfer to the lowly Wistan once the Saxon has subjugated Brennus to fear. If absolute power corrupts

absolutely as the truism goes, then Wistan finds that power to be terror.⁶ Regardless of Arthur's strides to "civilize" his kingdom, the two peoples cannot come to terms with their respective deep fear of the Other: not only the racial Other, but the absolute fear of death, silence, and nothingness. While those loyal to Arthur erase and denounce their crimes, continuing to slaughter innocent Saxons that travel "in peace through this very country" (221), Wistan remains distrustful of the Britons. As he explains to Father Jonus, "Only a foolish shepherd hears a snapping twig or spots a shape in the dark and assumes a companion come to relieve him. We're a cautious breed" (150). Ishiguro destabilizes the separation of civilized human from the savage animal by showing that the mutual fear of the Other brings the Britons and Saxons together, as well as their shared capacity to terrorize one another and their mutual inability to truly forgive and forget.

The Briton and Saxon conceptions of justice are also entirely contingent on their relative understandings of God. Ishiguro foregrounds the indeterminacy between the civil and savage by displaying how both Christians and pagans tirelessly excuse their violent actions as necessary in the eyes of God. That the Britons conceive of their Law of the Innocents as a sacred Christian vow shared between king and kingdom should by now be clear. Once Arthur and his men soil their great law, Axl—then called Axelum or Axelus (214)—found he could no longer call himself a Knight and servant of his God in good conscience: "The law was well held on both sides until that day [of the slaughter of innocents], Sir Gawain [...] It was an unholy thing to break it [...] My memory's of God himself betrayed, sir. And I'm not sorry if the mist robs me further of it" (274). While speaking with Father Jonus in his monastery midway through the novel, Wistan presses his host on the ethics of Christ's rewriting of the Old Law of justice for the New

Law of mercy and forgiveness. “How can you describe as penance, sir, the drawing of a veil over the foulest deeds? Does he [your Christian god] care so little for justice left undone?” (151). For Wistan, there can be no forgiveness of those he has sworn to hate, only what he determines to be a just retribution for the crimes of the past.

Continuing to critique Father Jonus on his faith in Christ’s boundless forgiveness, Wistan asks “What use is a god with boundless mercy, sire? You mock me as a pagan, yet the gods of my ancestors pronounce clearly their ways and punish severely when we break their laws. Your Christian god of mercy gives me license to pursue their greed, their lust for land and blood, knowing a few prayers and a little penance will bring forgiveness and blessing” (151). In one of Wistan’s many clever reversals, he fights his Christian enemies with their own logic, maintaining that even after systematically killing all of his Briton adversaries he can easily “bribe” their God “with self-inflicted pain and a few prayers” and all will be forgiven (151). By insisting on the exactness of the letter of his religious laws, Wistan echoes the early books of the Pentateuch, especially the *lex talionis*.⁷ This law stipulated that violent crimes will be met with equal retribution:

“Whosoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death,” and if any fighting among men causes a miscarriage of a pregnant bystander, then “you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (NRSV, *Exodus* 21:12-26). While Wistan’s *ethos* concerning justice alludes to the *lex talionis*, Gawain and Jonus depend on how Christ reinterprets and figuratively rewrites the Old Law during the Sermon on the Mount.⁸ While Wistan feigns to Father Jonus a reversal in his position onto the side of the civilized Christians through his false humility, Gawain must also recognize how closely aligned his own horrendous acts were to the Old Testament God of wrath. As

Gawain confesses to Wistan moments before his death, “we slaughtered plenty, I admit it, caring not who was strong and who weak. God may not have smiled at us, but we cleansed the land of war” (285). Each warrior explains away his dishonorable offenses by appropriating the logic of the other’s God as a way to disassociate himself from admitting his horrific acts and animalistic tendencies. If the Old Law and the New are meant to educate us on how to be better human beings—more moral, just, decent, and civil—nothing could be further from the case throughout *The Buried Giant*. Both Wistan and Arthur’s Knights pervert the Old and the New Law to rationalize their violence against the Other.

Though the Britons broadly label Wistan a pagan, numerous moments in Ishiguro’s narrative suggest that Wistan’s paganism shares a good deal with Judaism. While Wistan complicates this as he continually refers to “the gods” in the plural, Wistan’s full and even intimate knowledge of Christ’s New Law as well as his allusions to the Old Law perhaps are too replete to be accidental. Wistan rejects Christ’s humanizing call for universal love and respect precisely because Arthur hypocritically perverts the New Law to disastrous ends. That the first edition hardback of *The Buried Giant* pictures the Holy Grail on its cover only further destabilizes the extent to which Ishiguro’s narrative is simultaneously an ironic and earnest pastiche retelling of Christian legends such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Le Morte d’Arthur*. Much more than Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, Wistan prefers instead the divine retribution and wrath of the Old Testament God who burns the cities of the plain to the ground. It is worth mentioning the similar descriptions of the leveling of Sodom and Gomorrah into a mass grave and the Great Plain where the buried giant lies just beyond

Axl's village: "Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground" (NRSV, *Genesis* 19.24-25). As with the cities of the plain, the Great Plain is both a dead landscape and a burial site of gigantic proportions, although Ishiguro does not remark further upon its vast stretches of mysteriously leveled ground. Wistan curiously recognizes that what rests in the ground itself is as much to be feared as those still alive to fight upon it.

In another ironic Judeo-Christian reversal, Wistan's demand for violent divine retribution through genocide finds perhaps its proper equivalent in the great flood, *the* supreme moment of the Judaic LORD's wrath. While the passage of course is well known, it is worth once again pausing over the particular echoes shared between the Biblical passage and Ishiguro's text: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence [...] And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for *the earth is filled with violence* because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth'" (NRSV, *Genesis* 6.11-12, emphases added). Not only does Wistan's terrorism mimic that of the Judaic LORD, but both also tie violence to the buried soil of the earth itself.⁹ Both diagnose humanity to be essentially corrupt in its barbaric ways, and both similarly invoke how such violence seems to have come from and seeped into the earth in a reciprocal and pervasive manner.

As Wistan reminds Axl while in the monastery, "This is today a place of peace and prayer, yet you needn't gaze so deep to find blood and terror" (141). The characters must confront the fact that under the peacefulness of the present are buried the horrors of the past, in both literal and figurative ways. Though I have already discussed many of the

figurative means by which Arthur obscures the past, numerous physical structures metaphorically erase the blood of the past by building on top of it in the novel's diegetic present. As the past emerges slowly through slippages in the narrative's present, Ishiguro's narrator exposes the monastery to have been a hillfort and its meditation tower to have been a complex military contraption meant to trap and burn Saxon warriors alive. After being forced under the monastery into a mausoleum while trying to escape Brennus' men, even Gawain suddenly becomes aware of the subliminal terror he has ignored while above ground:

Here are the skulls of men, I won't deny it. There an arm, there a leg, but just bones now. An old burial ground. And so it may be. I dare say, sire, our whole country is this way. A fine green valley. A pleasant copse in the springtime. Dig its soil, and not far beneath the daisies and buttercups come the dead. And I don't talk, sir, only of those who received Christian burial. Beneath our soil lie the remains of old slaughter. (171)

Gawain must confront in the monastery's underground dungeon the bones of those he and his fellow Knights have brutally killed. After they escape the mausoleum Gawain quickly rationalizes the blood on his hands as necessary for peace, once back above ground. Wistan remains exceptional from all others in numerous ways, particularly in his inexplicable ability to be unaffected by Querig's mist. What truly separates Wistan from all others is his understanding—like that of Yahweh before the flood—that true terror lies buried in the ground and, like the giant worm in Brennus' stomach, in the corrupt and violent core of men. Gawain fails to defend Arthur when confronted by Wistan because only the Saxon warrior, unlike the Knights of the Round Table, can acknowledge that

true terror *is* the irrational in nature: the savage violence of men, the endless amounts of blood shed into the earth, and the giant abyss of our past and ourselves that we bury and cannot face.¹⁰

3 — THE BURIED GIANT

I had a rather precarious feeling, perched on the edge of that mountain [...] Then I said: ‘You wouldn’t think anything had happened here, would you? Everything looks so full of life. But that area down there’ — I waved my hand at the view below us — ‘all that area was so badly hit when the bomb fell. But look at it now.’ — *A Pale View of Hills*

In *The Deliverance of Others*, David Palumbo-Liu theorizes that when confronted with human alterity we tend to differentiate the self or sameness from otherness principally upon the extent to which the latter is a rational being (32-33). According to Palumbo-Liu, “Those who subscribe to rational choice theory believe that in it we have a tool for understanding how all human beings, regardless of race, culture, gender, age, make choices: rational choice theory posits a human commonality based on reason and its deployment” (29). For Palumbo-Liu, the boundaries of the self are maintained only through the humanist “belief that reason is universal rather than particular” (53). An imagined and “Enlightened” community distinguishes itself from animals and non-human Others by conceptualizing the latter as thoroughly “irrational.” As Palumbo-Liu posits, “[T]he dilemma of ‘animal’ otherness is linked surely to the issue of racial otherness” (62).

In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro critiques the failings of the Britons’ humanizing logic as a tool of Arthurian imperialism by basing it on a register of rationality that ultimately serves to determine what is and is not human and what can and cannot be thought and remembered. As I briefly mentioned in my introduction, the Britons

subjugate the Saxons in an attempt to maintain peace against what they label irrational while simultaneously erasing their own acts of barbarism. As I hope to have indicated in my first two sections, Ishiguro thoroughly weakens the categorization of the civil Britons from the savage Saxons by rendering them profoundly contradictory yet selfsame. Ishiguro accomplishes this by exposing in the Britons a hypocritically disavowed and brutal past riddled with grave injustices, unethical methods of governing and procuring peace, and disturbing crimes against humanity in their genocide against the Saxons.

By undermining the division between the Britons and Saxons, Ishiguro underlines some of the pretentious failings of rationality with regards to erasing or eradicating cultural difference based on socially determined irrationality. Palumbo-Liu directly addresses the same questionable logic between the self and Other as Ishiguro, emphasizing that “by conceptually and ethically displacing the animal-human binary, [...] the ‘nonhuman,’ marked by its lack of reason, becomes less and less alien, and the possession of ‘reason’ a more and more problematic definition of mankind” (26). While Ishiguro reveals in the Britons and Saxons a shared commonality far exceeding their culturally imagined differences, he simultaneously accentuates the same lack of reason within “mankind” as Palumbo-Liu. Ishiguro metaphorically represents this reversal from the reasonable to the unreasonable in the symbolic buried giant, creating in this complex figure what I have called the Other *par excellence*, or pure alterity.

While my discussion of the Other has up until now focused on both how the language of imperialism marginalizes Saxon alterity and does violence through its “civil” and “savage” labels, this is not the same Otherness that Ishiguro exposes in the figure of the buried giant. Instead, Ishiguro illustrates a pure alterity through the figure of the

buried giant by demonstrating the giant to be that which eludes both rationality and Arthur's attempts to contain, subsume, or subvert it through reason or a humanizing civility. Most specifically, Ishiguro renders the buried giant as the irrationalism (and at times the meaninglessness) of death and the Britons and Saxons' shared terror of silence, nothingness, the unknown, and the infinite. The buried giant is the monstrous terror that Brennus feels for Wistan but that neither warrior can name (212), as well as the revulsion that Knights such as Axl and Gawain feel buried within themselves when confronting the silent darkness of their consciences.¹¹

The buried giant is also much larger, physically and metaphorically, than the burial ground which Axl and Beatrice pass over early in Ishiguro's narrative. That Ishiguro deliberately gives no textual evidence apart from Beatrice's myth that a giant indeed lays buried in the Great Plain only further enforces that this is most likely a red-herring, and yet another defensive coping mechanism of rationalism to keep Axl and Beatrice's terror in check.¹² Ishiguro never indicates that in the "giant's cairn" an actual giant has been laid to rest near the pit that houses Querig. Like the characters' other encounters with magical beings in which they mistakenly rationalize the unknown through a fantastic story or power, the giant's cairn is more likely *a giant cairn* where unspeakable numbers of slain and unidentified bodies were buried. Wistan mentions that other Saxons have tried to slay Querig unsuccessfully since Arthur's reign. That the she-dragon rests in a hellish pit only adds to the possibility that the space—like much of Arthur's vast kingdom—was for a time an equally hellish battlefield. Faced with the possibility of death, Gawain wants only for Axl to promise that when Wistan cuts him down he will be sure his body is buried elsewhere among his own people (287-88).

Much like Querig's mist, the characters feel the buried giant's presence as a pervasive and "vague unease" which often "gives way to some *other* emotion" (67-68, emphasis added). The giant also metaphorically spreads across the landscape and gives rise to the fear of the unknown, darkness, and encounters with silence: Axl feels "stab[s] of fear that seem bottomless" (230) and Edwin feels "fear [over his own] silence" (240), while Wistan fears why he ought to be "uncertain what it is [he has] kept hidden" (240) and Gawain fears becoming in death "a neighbour to the very ones [he] slaughtered" (263). More cryptically, Ishiguro suggests the buried giant is a "great secret known only to dying men" (262).¹³

Gawain and Axl both struggle to confront the unplumbed depths of their nature and character during the rare moments when they must face their own unspeakably violent pasts.¹⁴ Gawain's reveries pit his illusions of his own "godly path" which "bring[s] men closer to God" (270) with the horrifying realization that he was an unforgiveable "slaughterer of babes" (214). Ishiguro writes that when facing the piles of Saxon skulls and miscellaneous bones buried in the mausoleum under the Christian monastery, Axl "had been in the throes of some powerful and strange emotion, one that had all but put him in a dream [...] And he had been caught in a kind of terror, yet at the same time had felt a curiosity—or something stronger and darker—and he had told himself firmly, 'Whatever it may be, let me see it, let me see it'" (156). A similarly insidious spell comes over Edwin in the mausoleum: "He kept staring at the hole in the floor, and his eyes, caught in the moonlight, seemed to Axl at that moment to have something strange about them, as though he were steadily coming under a spell" (162).

Axl looks long into the dark terror of himself like Nietzsche's abyss but he sees only the black abyss staring back: his own past savagery and his inhumane actions rationalized in the name of justice. Considering the Britons and Saxons determine that they must terrorize and destroy their respectively monstrous enemies, *The Buried Giant* speaks of perhaps nothing greater than that "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster himself" (Nietzsche, *Beyond* 97). The figurative buried giant, like Ishiguro's novel as a whole, expresses Nietzsche's understanding of humanity's remarkable skill to deliberately mis-tell the story of its nature and character and to bury its own brutally dark realities deep within itself.¹⁵ As Nietzsche claims in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "[A]re not books written precisely to *hide* what is *in* us? [...The philosopher] will doubt whether behind every cave in him there is not, and must necessarily be, a still deeper cave: an ampler, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abyss behind every bottom, beneath every 'foundation'" (Nietzsche 257, emphases added). Like Beatrice's pain from "all those hours [she] had of darkness" which she believes were "with [her] without [her] knowing" (102), the giant abyss beneath every surface remains felt though subliminally buried from thought or view.

Through the figure of the buried giant Ishiguro exposes a metaphorical void that humanist rationality faces when confronted with the fearful absolutism of death as an inescapable, irrational, and inconceivable reality: or more simply, when faced with pure alterity. The buried giant symbolizes the equally terrifying possibility that death's abyss is perhaps a meaningless conclusion to a meaningless life where only true savagery and blood are fundamentally real or knowable. Arthur's great humanizing Law of the Innocents and his erasure of genocide through cultural forgiveness and forgetting would

therefore be fragile veils pulled over a horrifying reality in an act of civility and as a desperate measure for peace and reconciliation. Arthur's actions would thus be precarious bridges over a fundamental void that could be destroyed as easily as Wistan suggests at the end of *The Buried Giant*. As Wistan implores Gawain to question, how can "peace hold for ever built on slaughter and a magician's trickery?" (286).

According to Palumbo-Liu, "Behind every critique of reason is another sort of rationality that founds that critique" (55). Just as Ishiguro conflates the civil with the savage, so does his "critique of reason" expose another buried contradiction in *The Buried Giant*: the irrationalism of societal rationalizations of human nature. Beyond Arthur's strides to bring culture to and civilize his kingdom, to enforce respect for human dignity and the rights of man, to preach Christ's New Law of mercy, love, and forgiveness, death awaits all. At best, Ishiguro's narrative suggests that the illogic of such an irrational death is beyond human comprehension in the same way that the buried giant is unspeakable and formless (212). At worst, Ishiguro postulates that death (and thus life) may be terrifyingly meaningless. Palumbo-Liu proposes that if "death is the one common point of recuperating [the] vision of being together," and if "each person's death is a death of others as well," then "the efforts of human beings [are] to defer or avoid death" (98). The Britons and Saxons' shared inability to rationally confront the absolute reality of death—the irrationalism and terror of the buried giant of their past, present, and future—ironically becomes what bridges the void between self and Other. Ishiguro curiously shows how Britons and Saxons must *avoid the* void at all costs—a figurative linguistic play in which life must avoid recognizing its antithesis, or death's abyss—by demonstrating how failure to do so slips Axl into "a kind of terror" that he wants to have

both revealed and recoils in horror from (156).¹⁶ When Palumbo-Liu asks “Amid multiplicity, [is] there any commonality?” he ultimately finds his answer to be an equal effort among all human beings to avoid confronting our shared fear of death (37).

Palumbo-Liu suggests that when faced with the fear of alterity or the unknown, human beings deal with these sources of anxiety—or what he refers to as generalized “affects”—by trying to rationalize or conceptualize them. Charting “the transition from [the] conceptualization of the affects as things to be mastered by conversion into ideas” (147), Palumbo-Liu argues that:

Reason is called on to do this. If we accept that one strong source of affect is the [fear] of the other, then we can see that mastering its affective power is *key to self-preservation*. [... This affect] can be *counterproductive, if not destructive, if left to its own devices*. Here, it is up to the imagination to rein in the equilibrium-threatening power of the sentiments. (147, emphases added)

Put perhaps more simply: it is only by rationally conceptualizing our fear of the unknown that we can diminish our terror of alterity. Ishiguro pauses numerous times during stirring and upsetting moments when Axl, Beatrice, and Gawain must recognize their unspoken fear of the Other: of the Saxons, their past inhumane actions, and their own death. For the Britons, their fear of the buried giant arises from the natural human drive for “self-preservation,” either from Saxon retribution for past crimes, or the larger terror of the absolute unknown and the conceptual nothingness of death. If “affects” (specifically our fearful anxieties) are “mastered by conversion into ideas” and “reason” as Palumbo-Liu suggests, and if mastering this power is “key to self-preservation,” one’s own direct and

sustained engagement with pure alterity results in “counterproductive, if not destructive” devices. Wistan’s effective terrorist tactics against the Britons depend upon the same rationalist assumptions that Palumbo-Liu finds in Enlightenment philosophy. Wistan’s success comes from his own sustained and deliberate engagement with the power of terror when the Britons’ rationalism fails to overcome the “equilibrium-threatening power of [Wistan’s] sentiments.” The buried giant, like the abyss, cannot be contained, named, or reasoned through. One can only feel, recognize, and eventually rebury or deny it in “self-preservation.”

Unflinching in his pursuit of vengeance against the Britons, Wistan recognizes the Britons’ dependence on Querig and their vulnerability to and fear of his irrational tactics. When Gawain asks if Wistan might take mercy on Querig and bless her though they “pray to different gods,” Wistan responds “What kind of god is it, sir, wishes wrongs to go forgotten and unpunished,” insisting that “old wounds [cannot] heal while maggots linger so richly” (286). Knowing Gawain’s extraordinary fear of sharing soil in death with those he has unjustly slaughtered, Wistan asserts he can “see how devoutly you wish it, for your old horrors to crumble as dust. Yet they await in the soil as white bones for men to uncover” (286). After Wistan slays Gawain and Querig, Axl asks the Saxon if he intends to “make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest” (297). Wistan notably answers with the only substantial remark concerning the terror of the buried giant:

How right to fear it, sir [...] The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will [crumble....] Men will burn their neighbours’ houses by night. Hang

children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses [...] And even as they move on, our armies will grow larger, swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance [...] And country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people's time here. (297)

Wistan begins anew the past's "circle of hate" (214), heralding the savage slaughter of a terrifying future. By staging the novel as an irresolvable antinomy in which defending either Arthur or Wistan equates to defending a horrifying genocide against the Other, Ishiguro cruelly (to recall Rushdie) gives the reader a proverbial circle within humanism that cannot be squared. In *The Buried Giant*, one either defends the necessity of erasing historical and racial oppression as necessary for peace, or embraces the complete destruction of one's oppressor in the name of justice. Adrift somewhere between the Old Law and the New, between Wistan and Gawain, the self and Other remain separated by a hauntingly wide void that refuses to be bridged. Only the giant rests silently buried between them.

4 — ISHIGURO AND POSTHUMANISM

I can declare that he was a truly good man at heart, a gentleman through and through, and one I am proud to have given my best years of service to.
—*The Remains of the Day*

In my previous three sections I have shown how in *The Buried Giant* Ishiguro critiques humanism's *ethos* and *logos* by calling into question how the imperialist Britons define "human being" and proper civility. The Britons achieve this by Othering the Saxons in a highly unethical manner. By placing his narrative loosely in the medieval period, Ishiguro effectively demonstrates that social constructions of a human being, as well as the proper cultivation of human beings, clearly precede the eighteenth-century

Enlightenment project. I have demonstrated that Ishiguro criticizes and cautions against the Britons' language of imperialism as a means to radically alter the epistemology and ontology of their world: the Britons determine how to define natural phenomena in their kingdom to order and make sense of them, and they furthermore manipulate through Querig what realities can and can not be thought or seen. Deciding who is human and what is real remains solely in the Britons' power. As Shigeo Matsuda says in *A Pale View of Hills*: "In your day [of imperialism], children in Japan were taught terrible things. They were taught lies of the most dangerous kind. Worst of all, they were taught not to see, not to question. And that's why the country was plunged into the most evil disaster in her entire history" (147). What is most terrifying in Ishiguro's novels is not that his characters are "taught not to see," but that they repress or rationalize their own complicity in past atrocities against the Other. The Britons rationalize their troubling imperial imperatives by couching them in a humanizing logic to civilize and peacefully maintain sovereignty over their land and their Saxon subjects.

Ishiguro establishes the violence done by labeling a people savage and placing them in opposition to a supposedly civil counterpart. In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro undoes or destabilizes the categories of these two terms by revealing in the Britons and Saxons not their shared humanity, but their capacity for remarkably barbaric crimes against humanity in the form of genocide. Ishiguro shows in the Britons and Saxons that what bridges the gap between them, if anything, is a mutual will to enact violence against the Other. Wistan learns that what effectively terrorizes the civilized Britons more than anything is their fear of silence and nothingness, of the irrational, and of death. By emphasizing the Britons' dependence on rationalism to distinguish the civil human from

the non-human savage, Ishiguro points yet again to a faulty logic within humanism itself, as Palumbo-Liu demonstrates in his “rational choice theory.” Through the Britons’ fear of pure alterity—the buried giant as a Lévinasian “infinite other”—Wistan gains a remarkable ability to terrorize those who have oppressed him. By writing *The Buried Giant* as an antinomy, Ishiguro underscores the equally unsettling *ethos* and *logos* of the marginalized Wistan.

With this unresolvable antinomy, Ishiguro returns the reader to the same unanswerable question that lingers in each of his novels: do the crimes of the past necessitate a cultural and collective forgetting when forgiveness becomes impossible? While Ishiguro critiques the humanist tradition, particularly its unethical drive to Other what it cannot recognize as human and then subsume, the role of empathy remains central in how Ishiguro addresses collective forgetting as yet another “necessary evil” to sever the “circle of hate.” And while in *The Buried Giant* and *Never Let Me Go* Ishiguro directly confronts some of humanism’s contradictions and failings, these two novels allow us to reconsider the extent to which Ishiguro’s concerns with humanism have been buried in his work all along.

Palumbo-Liu and a handful of other critics have addressed the post-human bioengineering questions in *Never Let Me Go* (*Deliverance* 114-23), and a few scholars such as Meera Tamaya have focused on Lord Darlington’s humanist education as a source of his vulnerability to Nazism in *The Remains of the Day* (“Ishiguro’s *Remains*”). But there has not yet been a sustained discussion of Ishiguro’s ongoing critique of humanism’s assumptions and failings throughout his *oeuvre*. I would argue that the limits of rationality and rationalizations of the past, the role of empathy as a productive and

destructive force, questioning how civility is best to be understood, and navigating the ethics of Othering are central in Ishiguro's fiction.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Shaffer's opening chapter to *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (1-11) or Susannah Hunnewell's preface to her *Paris Review* interview with Ishiguro in "The Art of Fiction No. 196."

² For a discussion of loss in Ishiguro, see Matthew Beedham's section on "Guilts and Ghosts" (17-19) in his discussion of *A Pale View of Hills* in *The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*.

For concerns over memory, see David Lodge's section on Ishiguro's "Unreliable Narrator" (154-157) throughout *The Remains of the Day* in *The Art of Fiction* in which Lodge posits Stevens "has never admitted to himself or to others that his employer was totally discredited by subsequent historical events" (155).

There are innumerable sources on repression in Ishiguro. See especially Katherine Stanton's "Foreign Feeling: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and the New Europe" in her short collection, *Cosmopolitan Fictions: Ethics, Politics, and Global Change in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje, Jamaica Kincaid, and J.M. Coetzee*. Stanton claims that "Ishiguro's characters serve as short-hand for emotional repression" and that such characters return to readers "a dominant theme in Ishiguro's fiction: the sacrifice of an emotional life to a sense of professional duty" (9-10).

For fatalism in Ishiguro, see James Wood's "The Human Difference," where he argues that the power of *Never Let Me Go* is its "picture of ordinary human life as in fact a culture of death. That is to say, Ishiguro's book is at its best when, by asking us to consider the futility of cloned lives, it forces us to consider the futility of our own" (38). Similarly, Claire Messud's review, "Love's Body," goes on to liken the futility in *Never Let Me Go* to Samuel Beckett and comments on his influence on Ishiguro: "As in Beckett, Ishiguro's characters, in their detached world, show us a version of our own minute preoccupations and piddling distractions, and raise life's largest questions for us all. Is this all there is? Must it end so soon? Why strive? Why persist? What is it all for?" (30).

For the resignation of the past in Ishiguro, see specifically Yegin Teo's "Testimony and the Affirmation of Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." Teo suggests that it is not until Kathy is able to ground her testimonial memories "from the perspective of 'the other'" (132) that a meaningful "wholeness" can emerge. For the clones, this is

contingent upon a mutual recognition of their shared historicity, locating themselves despite being “‘stranded in the middle’ of time as individuals and as communities” (133). The characters hope to never let go of their shared experiences and their imagined community, instead continually “reaffirm[ing...] the memory of the people and places that have made us who we are” (133). Considering that the clones’ bodies do not even belong to them, the only real possessions they seem to have are these memories. Teo notes how often the clones describe their memories as lost items of “‘strange rubbish,’” and that there is “a link between memory and personal objects” in which these “things” carry with them the memories and histories of a life that has disappeared (134).

³ I have borrowed the term “necessary evil” from Yegin Teo. For Teo, *Never Let Me Go* proposes an “alternative history of England” that both “abhorred the existence of the clones, yet recognized them as a necessary evil,” stressing the “ethical problem of the ‘injunction to forget’” and its repercussions (128).

⁴ See especially John Marks’ “Clone Stories: ‘Shallow are the souls who have forgotten to shudder.’” According to Marks, “*Never Let Me Go* stands as a warning against the brutal instrumentalization of human life”; Ishiguro’s clones, like ourselves, are “composed of ‘inhumane’ mechanisms that can be abstracted—and even *extracted*—from our bodies” (350, emphasis in original).

⁵ In fact, I have yet to find any scholarship written on *The Buried Giant*. Considering Knopf published the novel just over a year ago, this is not all that surprising.

⁶ While this quote is at times misattributed to George Orwell’s 1945 dystopian allegory *Animal Farm*, the original is attributed to the historian Lord Acton who wrote that “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men” (“Acton-Creighton” 364). Considering *The Buried Giant*’s concern with the past and the necessity for collective forgetting, it is especially ironic that Lord Acton’s quotation comes from a letter to his colleague Mandell Creighton over “how historians should judge the past” (“Acton-Creighton” 364).

⁷ See especially *Exodus* 21-23 for a more developed example of the letter of the Old Law and the *lex talionis*.

⁸ See *Matthew* 5-7, where Christ directly invokes the *lex talionis* and figuratively rewrites it. Specifically alluding to the Old Law of retaliation, Christ claims that “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (NRSV, *Matthew* 5:38-39).

⁹ Wistan’s link between violence and buried soil finds a direct analogy in the Torah and can be traced from the Biblical Fall through Cain and Abel and into the Flood. Banishing Adam from Eden, the LORD tells him “cursed is the ground because of you” (NRSV,

Genesis 3:17). After Cain kills his brother Abel—the mythical first murder—the LORD tells Cain, “Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand” (NRSV, *Genesis* 4:10-11).

¹⁰ In an equally cryptic way, Moses cannot see—and cannot truly fathom or face—God: “[Y]ou cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (NRSV, *Exodus* 33:20).

¹¹ The terror of the unnamable giant between Brennus and Wistan recalls especially Jacques Derrida’s seminal conclusion to “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” For Derrida, as in the buried giant, the only available response is to “turn [our] eyes away in the face of the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary in whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the non-species, in the formless, mute, infant, and the terrifying form of monstrosity” (293).

¹² This is similar in some regards to the way in which Ishiguro’s first three novels never directly address their respective largest and most pressing problems on the level of both plot and character. As Barry Lewis points out in *Kazuo Ishiguro*, the atomic bombing of Nagasaki is only mentioned in passing twice in *A Pale View of Hills* (37-38). Readers of *An Artist of the Floating World* similarly are never exposed to a detailed description of Ono’s propaganda or the ways in which, as Beedham emphasizes, “the nationalist movement [Ono] served is implicated in the deaths of his wife and son” (36). In *The Remains of the Day*, the extent to which Lord Darlington was complicit in the rise of Nazism, as what Meera Tamaya calls a “crypto Fascist” (51), is almost entirely eschewed by Stevens. What is loudest, largest, and most significant—what is often directly in front of Ishiguro’s characters—remains almost entirely ignored or repressed in Ishiguro’s fiction as a remarkable *absence*. So too does the titular “buried giant” suggest a similar proverbial elephant in the room that is always present but can (almost) never be addressed, seen, or consciously considered.

¹³ I believe there are many parallels between *The Buried Giant* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, but simply not enough space to incorporate them into this project. In particular, Wistan and Kurtz share innumerable striking similarities in their recognition of man’s capacity to terrorize and to enact considerably violent acts of barbarism while couching behind the veil of “civility.” As for the “great secret known only to dying men,” its analogue of course is Kurtz’s infamous acknowledgment while slipping into death’s abyss that he sees only “The horror! The horror!” (170). As Marlow observes (and Ishiguro alludes to), “It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and

hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during *that supreme moment of complete knowledge?*” (170, emphases mine). There is also a significant amount of work to be done considering how both Conrad and Ishiguro collapse the civil/savage binary, rendering it meaningless, as though it were unavoidable considering their ancient Roman inheritance. Consider, for example, the opening lines from Marlow as compared to the larger narrative of *The Buried Giant*: “‘And this also,’ said Marlow suddenly, ‘has been one of the dark places of the earth [....] I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day.... We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday’” (101).

¹⁴ In a strikingly similar way, so too does Slavoj Žižek find he must view violence from a “sideways glance” as there “are reasons for looking at the problem of violence awry.” For Žižek, as for those who encounter the buried giant, “there is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with it [violence and terror]” (*Violence* 3-4).

¹⁵ See especially “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense,” in which Nietzsche elaborately demonstrates the ways in which the conceptual fictions we create to make sense of nature and ourselves are misrepresented to be fundamental truths: man thus “lies in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are centuries old” (84).

¹⁶ I would like to pay credit to my academic peer Greg Deinert for his perspicacious observation about how curious the etymology of *avoid* is in relation to *the void*.